

BOOK REVIEW

'Vera Gran: the Accused' by Agata Tuszynska

By **Richard Eder** MARCH 09, 2013

After Germany was defeated in World War II and withdrew its forces from Europe, a new if lesser anguish began, even as the occupation ended. A number of those who had collaborated with the Nazis were sought out and punished. Accusations ranged from relatively clear cut to shadowy, from those who'd actively assisted German repression to those merely rumored to have done so, with underlying motivations sometimes as self-serving as a professional rivalry, a property claim, a neighbor's grudge. And nowhere was this painful and often ambiguous process more actively pursued than in Poland — no doubt because no other country had suffered such a bloody occupation, with millions of Jews and non-Jews exterminated.

Much has been written about this; two years ago Alan Riding made a searching study of how collaborators and suspected collaborators were treated in France. Now the Polish journalist Agata Tuszynska has produced a book of extraordinary depth and power that sets one tormented individual on a lifelong struggle across the moral



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Vera Gran was a popular Polish singer.

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Before the war Vera Gran was Poland's most popular singer, performing her romantic ballads at theaters and cabarets around the country. When the Germans invaded, she along with her fellow Jews were forced into the ghetto. In the first year or so, though, life there was an odd simulacrum of life outside — confinement apart, and the dread of what might come next. (It came.) There was money, some smuggled in and much more earned by black marketers and others who worked for and with the Germans. There was considerable business activity, among restaurants in particular, and a frenetic performing arts scene. No doubt it was a matter of eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we die. (They died.)

And singing at Sztuka, the ghetto's most fashionable nightclub, Gran was, if anything, more popular than ever. The clientele included ordinary ghetto denizens avid for romantic nostalgia, the profiteers and those working directly for the Germans, an occasional German, and Poles sneaking in from outside. It was a mix worthy of Rick's Café Américain.

When the war ended Gran was accused of collaborating: not just enriching herself by performing for Polish Nazis but mingling with them. Two official inquiries cleared her, as did a letter from Nazi hunter Simon Wiesenthal. Nevertheless the drumbeat of accusation continued. It blighted her effort to resume her career in Poland; it followed her as she tried to perform in Israel and Britain, and in France where she settled until her death in 2007 (though she had a few years of success in the '60s).

Tuszynska spent several years visiting Gran in her Paris basement apartment in the last years of the singer's life; her book is in two interwoven parts. One is a portrait of a confused old woman living in a hideously cluttered apartment. Gran was obsessed by enemies — not just the accusers of 30 years before, but by those she was sure were persecuting her day by day: flooding her apartment with sewage from a blocked toilet, sending a dog to bite her. It is a vigorous and tender rendering of failing old age, one

with flashes of tough lucidity. Gran on her solitude: “the telephone . . . has fallen silent . . . a somber silence in the mailbox.” On her refusal to attend funerals: “What do you do at a funeral? . . . Hug the earth?”

The author’s style can be tough on the reader. She writes in a choppy narrative fashion, with side-trips and rambles and occasional seeming incoherence. The intention is admirable, even heroic, though not quite successful. She does not just portray the chaos of poor Gran’s mind; she enters in it to keep her company.

The other part of Tuszynska’s book, and her main purpose, explores the fallout of the collaboration accusation in Gran’s life. Her marriage to a doctor who all his life sought to help and support her; her bitterness at her accompanist, Wladyslaw Szpilman, the hero of Polanski’s “The Pianist,” who not only never mentions her in his memoirs but denounced her as a collaborator, possibly out of fear of being accused himself.

Years later, Szpilman would retract his accusation. And as Tuszynska went around interviewing the accusers, many — not all — similarly confessed their doubts. It is part of the writer’s theme: the fog that pervades the whole notion of collaboration. She enlivens her point by citing some of the absurdities. One actor was censured because he had walked the dog of a German director; another because a high occupation official congratulated him on a performance.

“You are not dead, therefore you succeeded, how did you manage it?” is how she sums up the stance of so many accusers. “You are not dead so you must have bought your life from someone.”

Back in Paris to a visit to the anonymous grave where Gran, who’d lost her whole family in the Holocaust, was buried, Tuszynska observes: “Not the least trace of anything, no name. Basically what’s the difference? Her relatives also have no graves.”

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